

Aunt Jennifer's Tigers

by Adrienne Rich

Class 12 Flamingo Poetry Chapter 11

About the poet

Adrienne Rich (1929 to 2012).

American poet, essayist and feminist. Born in Baltimore.

One of the most influential women poets of the 20th century.

Her ~~late~~ early work used strict form ; later she shifted to free verse and explicit politics.

About the poem

Published in 'A Change of World' (1951), her debut volume.

Three quatrains, iambic pentameter, rhyme scheme AA BB in each stanza (couplets).

12 lines only - but one of the most studied poems on patriarchy.

Stanza 1: The Tigers

"Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance
across a screen,

Bright topaz denizens of a world
of green.

They do not fear the men beneath
the tree ;

• They pace in sleek chivalric
certainty."

The tigers are her embroidery -
a panel she stitches in wool.

Three qualities :

- * bright topaz - golden, glowing
- * fearless of men beneath the tree
- * pace with chivalric certainty

tigers = free, fearless, proud

<- contrast

'Chivalric' is the key adjective -
the tigers carry knightly courage
that Aunt Jennifer herself lacks.

Stanza 2 : The Aunt

"Aunt Jennifer's fingers
fluttering through her wool
Find even the ivory needle
hard to pull.

The massive weight of Uncle's
wedding band
Sits heavily upon Aunt
Jennifer's hand."

The fingers 'flutter' - trembling,
weak. Even a light ~~metal~~ ivory needle
resists her pull.

massive weight of Uncle's wedding band

<- the central image

The ring is small but Rich calls
it 'massive'. The image carries
the entire poem's politics :
marriage as oppression.

The band 'sits heavily' - the
weight is psychological, not literal.

Stanza 3 : After death

"When Aunt is dead, her terrified
hands will lie

Still ringed with ordeals she
was mastered by.

The tigers in the panel that
she made

Will go on prancing, proud and
unafraid."

Even in death, the wedding ring
stays on her finger. The marriage
leaves its mark beyond life.

Notice the word 'terrified' -

Rich could have written 'tired' or
'still', but chose a stronger,
accusatory word.

the tigers survive - art outlives life

<- the closing turn

The art is free even when the
artist was caged.

Contrast : tigers vs Aunt

Tigers

prance freely

topaz, bright

fearless

proud

sleek chivalric

certainty

eternal in the panel

Aunt Jennifer

fingers flutter

weary

terrified

mastered

weak, trembling

ordeals

dies, leaves marks

Why the contrast matters

The tigers are what Aunt Jennifer dreams of becoming - free, golden, unafraid of men beneath the tree.

But she can only create them ; she cannot become them. The wedding band keeps her hand heavy.

Tigers = her art = her secret self, unshackled.

Themes

(a) Patriarchy

Uncle's wedding band is the visible sign of male power. It sits heavily even after Aunt's death.

(b) Female suffering

fingers flutter, ^{*} hands ringed by ordeals, terrified even in death.

(c) Art as escape

the embroidered tigers are her secret rebellion, the only place she can be fearless.

(d) Art outlives the artist

the panel survives. The tigers go on prancing, proud and unafraid. Art carries her unspoken voice.

(e) Marriage as cage

the central feminist reading - marriage, especially in 1950s America, often meant the woman's dreams were locked in needlework.

Poetic devices

1. Symbolism

tigers = freedom, courage.

wedding band = patriarchy.

wool / needle = domestic labour.

2. Imagery

visual - bright topaz, green world,

ivory needle. tactile - fingers

fluttering, hand weighed down.

3. Alliteration

'fingers fluttering', 'prancing,
proud', 'sleek chivalric'.

4. Metaphor / hyperbole

the wedding band is called

'massive' - hyperbole for

psychological weight.

5. Personification

the ring 'sits' heavily ; the

tigers 'pace with ^{*}certainty' and

will 'go on prancing' after

death.

Form and tone

The poem's tight form (three quatrains, regular meter, neat couplets) mirrors the tight life Aunt Jennifer is locked into.

Tone moves from observation (stanza 1) to pity (stanza 2) to quiet defiance (stanza 3).

Quick revision

Q. What do the tigers symbolise?

A. Freedom, fearlessness, and the rebellious self Aunt Jennifer cannot openly be.

Q. What is the 'massive weight'?

A. Uncle's wedding band - symbol of the constraints of marriage.

Q. Why does Rich end with the tigers?

A. To show that art (her panel) outlives the artist's suffering.